

## Herding Rabbits

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You know exactly what I'm talking about: out-of-control meetings with out-of-control people with out-of-control emotions resulting in a poorly crafted action plan AT BEST. Heaven help us. If I had a dollar for every unproductive, unsatisfying meeting I've attended over the past few decades, I'd be a rich woman indeed.

Why is this? Lack of communication? Absolutely. Minimal planning? You bet. But I believe the primary culprit is that we simply haven't known a better way to structure group work to make it productive, satisfying, and honoring of all participants. Until now.

The Collaborative Operating System™ (COS) is a completely explicit system that offers us a resolution to the eternal conflict between self-interest and the interests of others. Remember the powerful movie "A Beautiful Mind" in which Russell Crowe plays Nobel Prize winner John Nash? The Nash Equilibrium – portrayed in the movie by the famous pick-up scene in the bar – proves the value of true win-win collaboration. Nash, suddenly reasoning that if he and his friends all go after the attractive blonde, most or all will be rejected; however, if they divide and conquer and approach the blonde's rather attractive friends as well, they each have a chance at acquiring a companion for the evening. Forgetting the blonde and rushing home to write up his new theorem, Nash declares: "Adam Smith was wrong. Each person doesn't benefit most when he does what's in his own best interests. He benefits most when he does what's in his own interest AND the interests of the group."

I had the opportunity to be trained in COS™ this year by the training team of Collaborative Leaders, Inc. ([www.collaborativeleaders.us](http://www.collaborativeleaders.us)) and was delighted to learn several strategies for running genuinely productive, genuinely satisfying "collaborative meetings." I share a few of these strategies with you today with the hope that, as a result, you'll be better equipped to herd those runaway rabbits—and get your butterflies flying all in one direction.

How many times have you attended a meeting not knowing why you're there, not believing the problem is worth solving, or not agreeing that the activity you've been asked to do will result in any positive change? Although problem solving can be one of the most difficult activities a group works on together, if done well, it can also be one of the most *empowering*. Defining the problem at the outset is a seemingly magical process that helps group members align around the intent or goal of the meeting. Imagine that!



Think about it. We solve problems, i.e., situations we want to change, by stringing together an assortment of smaller decisions. The first decision a group *must* make when embarking on a problem-solving effort is this: “What problem do we really want to solve?” If a clear, concise problem statement is not reached, the meeting could fall apart and/or the activities suggested could result in a complete waste of time.

Each time a group of people gathers together to resolve an issue or plan an activity, they need to agree on what problem they are solving. This is why all collaborative meetings start with the question, “What problem do we want to/need to solve at this meeting?” As Albert Einstein so aptly expressed, “In a crisis, if I had only an hour I’d spend the first 50 minutes defining the problem and the last 10 minutes solving it.”

Focusing on a solution, activity, or goal will not help you define a problem. Instead, ask your group to complete this sentence: “The problem we’re trying to solve is...” or “The situation we’re trying to change is...” You should end up with problem statements that look like these:

- We don’t have a plan for achieving our organization’s membership goals.
- We don’t have a process for training our interns.
- We don’t have an agenda for our quarterly retreat.
- We lack credibility in our community.
- Our congregation is not aligned around our evangelism efforts.

Once you’re clear on the problem you’re trying to solve, you’re ready to prepare your Collaborative Meeting Design—an explicit, tactical plan created for the purpose of helping a group solve a problem together. Remember that your stakeholders (people who have an interest in the situation at hand) need to be *aligned* around the plan for it to be successful. The Collaborative Meeting Design is an amazing little tool that reminds you to make explicit:

- 1) The logistical details such as time and location
- 2) The participants, guests, facilitator, recorder and any other attendees
- 3) Necessary pre-work or other preparation
- 4) The problem the meeting will solve or address
- 5) The intent of the meeting
- 6) The desired outcomes required (and desired) to achieve the intent
- 7) The specific process by which the intent and desired outcomes will be achieved

I’ve copied below a sample Collaborative Meeting Design. It includes several of the collaborative processes frequently employed in a collaborative meeting.



**Meeting Name**

Date:

Time:

Location:

**Preparation/Notes:**

- Confirm food & beverage preparation and set up
- Confirm arrangement of tables and chairs
- Gather and organize hand-outs
- Distribute copies of agenda

**Attendees:**

**Facilitator:**

**Recorder:**

**Context:**

**Problem Statement:**

**Meeting Intent:**

**Desired Outcomes:**

**Agenda:**

Time	Topic	Process	Topic Leader
12:30	Check-In	Council	Volunteers
12:35		Presentation	
12:45		Discussion	
12:50		Brainstorm	
12:55		Question & Answer	
1:00		Break-Out Sessions	
1:25		Return to Group	
1:27	Check Out	Closing Reflections on meeting	Volunteers
1:30	Adjourn		



Regardless of the purpose of the meeting—whether it be to solve a community-wide problem, to develop an action plan for the future of an organization or simply to plan a social event—incorporating these basic COS™ principles will greatly improve communication among the participants which, in turn, will result in meetings that are efficient, enjoyable, productive, and honoring of all participants.

I wish you well as you put these core COS™ principles into practice and hope you'll take a moment to share with me the difference they make in your organizations—and lives.

